

## **The state we are in**

*Bullingdon Club Britain:  
The Ransacking of a Nation*

Sam Bright

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### **John Newsinger**

**I**n 2011, the Eton entrance exam paper asked prospective students (12 to 13-year-old boys) to draft a speech:

The year is 2040. There have been riots in the streets of London after Britain has run out of petrol because of an oil crisis in the Middle East. Protestors have attacked public buildings. Several policemen have died. Consequently, the Government has deployed the Army to curb the protests. After two days the protests have been stopped but 25 protestors have been killed by the army. You are the Prime Minister. Write the script for a speech to be broadcast to the nation in which you explain why employing the army against violent protestors was the only option available to you and one which was both necessary and moral. (p. 58)

This is how our rulers are educated. At Eton, the posh boys are not just educated to rule over us. They are also prepared for the necessary shooting down of hoi polloi protestors who have the impudence to take to the streets and challenge the authorities. Of course, when this exam paper leaked in 2013, Ofsted was immediately sent in, the teachers responsible for this blatant indoctrination were fired and the school was eventually closed down because of the damage it had done to the country over many generations. Only kidding. . . .

But imagine if it had leaked out that students in a state comprehensive school had been asked to imagine it was 2040. Let us suppose these pupils were asked to prepare a speech calling for a general strike and the erection of barricades in order to fight a corrupt incompetent authoritarian government, headed by an Old Etonian, that was relentlessly driving down the living standards and worsening the working conditions of the great majority of the

population to safeguard the interests of its super rich friends. Without any doubt there would have been a press outcry, spearheaded by the *Daily Mail*; Ofsted would certainly have been sent in; people would have lost their jobs – indeed been banned from teaching; and the school might even have been closed down or, at the very least, placed under new management. Of course, this would never actually happen because the British people know their place – and Sam Bright’s *Bullingdon Club Britain* is a first class exploration of exactly where that place is at present.

Bright relentlessly chronicles the scandal that is Austerity Britain, where a democratic crisis has developed on the back of an economic crisis. As he points out, Britain is far from alone in this. While the great majority of the population have had their living standards cut, with more and more people forced into poverty, the ‘number of billionaires in the UK reached its highest number ever’. What he sets out to explore is how ‘the sort of mindset epitomised by the Bullingdon Club has infected British politics, business, and high society’. (pp. 18-19) He sees the Bullingdon Club elite – privileged, entitled posh boys – as having moved on from smashing up restaurants and insulting and intimidating members of the lower orders to

now ransacking Britain [. . .] the political, social and economic establishment in Britain is effectively acting as a private club for the privileged, dedicated to its own gluttony at the direct expense of ordinary people. Money and power are hoarded among this alliance of aristocrats, oligarchs and their butlers – and you’re not invited. (p. 23)

And to ensure their continued political domination they have pivoted to their own particular brand of vicious right-wing populism.

Bright has assembled an enormous body of material laying bare the way we are ruled today; and even those who have been following Britain’s decline with some attention will learn from his book. This reader, for example, did not know that the nine top public schools – the so-called Clarendon Schools – had ‘increased their assets by 44% or almost £600 million from 2015 to 2020’, rising ‘from £1.36 billion to £1.96 billion in this period’. And, as he points out, because all these schools have charitable status, they ‘benefit from tax exemptions to the tune of £3 billion every year’. Rishi Sunak’s old public school, Winchester College (he was head boy<sup>1</sup>), increased its assets from £276 million in 2015 to £385 million in 2020. Presumably this includes the £100,000 that Sunak generously donated to the school.

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<sup>1</sup> Apparently being head boy is something to be proud of, although my memory of my grammar school days is that the headboy and his cronies were despised as a bunch of crawl-arses and teachers pets – but there you go.

But here we encounter a recurring problem with Bright's analysis: he writes of how this public school elite are increasingly capturing 'the institutions of democracy, academic learning and wealth creation', so much so that 'the country appears to be betraying its commitment – however distant – to meritocracy'. He actually argues that Thatcher, Major and Blair tried to squeeze the 'rejuvenated aristocracy' out of politics – which rather misses the point about their governments. Each of them which presided over massive increases in the wealth and power of the rich and super rich. But, according to Bright, these governments actually resisted the plutocrats and it was not until the public schoolboys David Cameron and George Osborne took over that the country began 'moving closer to plutocracy – a ruling class whose power is derived from its wealth'. (pp. 59-60, 74, 78-79)

Bright has too rosy a view of pre-Austerity politics. When, one wonders, has Britain not had a ruling class whose power derived from its wealth? Bright's demolition of the privileged position of the public schools is excellent, but he comes perilously close to blaming them for everything, to seeing them as solely responsible for the state we are in.

Bright provides us with an essential chapter on 'Tufton Street', which is, he tells us, 'a place that knows how to keep a secret'. The Street 'has been the primary command centre for libertarian lobbying groups . . . for the last decade'. There were at least nine well-financed lobbying groups operating out of Tufton Street in 2019, among them the TaxPayers Alliance, and their influence was at its height during the brief time Liz Truss was Prime Minister. However, one must not underestimate their influence on successive Conservative governments. Bright describes the network as 'the civil servants of the Bullingdon Club elite – the backroom nerds – who have been commissioned to formulate and popularise the political ideas that will ensure the continued success of this elite'. (pp. 85-86)<sup>2</sup> Once again he provides us with a compelling forensic account, along with some memorable details. Among many other things, we learn that Steve Bannon tried (and failed) to buy the *Guido Fawkes* online platform. As he points out: '*Guido* is fervently supportive of Brexit, a supposedly patriotic project, yet the publication is not actually based in the UK', but in the United States. (p. 103)<sup>3</sup> Bannon, Bright

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<sup>2</sup> On Tufton Street see <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRDLIOME47c>>.

<sup>3</sup> They achieve this legal sleight-of-hand because the servers containing the website's information are, according to the Guido Fawkes website itself, located 'in the United States of America under the protection of the First Amendment to the Constitution'. (See <<https://order-order.com/about/>>.) Perhaps even more telling, the Guido website also states: 'Editorial control is exercised by the editor who is not a United Kingdom resident' – Paul Staines claiming residence in Southern Ireland, which is obviously useful, post Brexit.

also reminds us, was the co-founder and vice-chairman of Cambridge Analytica. He has also claimed to have occasionally advised Boris Johnson on how to bring down Theresa May – and, presumably, on how to play the culture wars card.

This is followed by another essential chapter, 'Politics, Privatised', where he looks at those billionaires and the like who have been financing the Conservative Party, and at the way individual politicians have been benefiting themselves and their friends. The incredible Boris Johnson–Alexander Lebedev connection is laid bare in all its shocking detail and Bright's examination of the financial relationship between the Tories and Vladimir Chernukin is invaluable.<sup>4</sup>

He sums up the state of British politics today:

Politics is a plaything for the rich, rather than a mass participation event. In the early 1950s, three million people were Conservative Party members, while more than a million belonged to the Labour Party. Now, the two main parties can count barely 600,000 members on their books combined. (p. 139)

Once again, he seems to have a somewhat rosy view of the past. The Conservative Party did not begin electing its leader until 1965, when MPs got to vote; and 1998, when ordinary party members got a vote – and even now those members have to choose from candidates chosen by the MPs. As for Labour, the Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, who presided over the creation of the NHS, was himself a former public schoolboy, proud of the public school system. He promoted as many public school Labour MPs as he could, actually keeping a list of their names and their public schools. There were 27 altogether of whom 7 were Old Etonians. All Attlee's Chancellors were former public school boys: Cripps went to Winchester, Dalton to Eton and Gaitskell also to Winchester. And then there is that bastion of democracy, the House of Lords, which successive Labour governments have mysteriously failed to abolish.

Arguably the most shocking revelation in the book comes from Dominic Cummings. He claims that Boris Johnson negotiated Covid payments that were made to the British newspaper industry directly with proprietors, without any officials involved. This was done in the guise of a 'Government-sponsored advertising campaign' – the cost of which has been, so far, successfully hidden away. This subsidy arrangement 'began in April 2020 and was called "All In, All Together"'. It was budgeted 'at £35 million for the first three months' but was 'seemingly still operating two years later'. If the scheme had continued at its initial rate, then 'total spending would have been well in excess of £200

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<sup>4</sup> See for example <<http://tinyurl.com/5n72mjcu>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/26/russian-born-husband-of-tory-donor-earned-millions-via-oligarch-connections>>.

million'. (pp. 182-183) This scandal demands an official inquiry. But which politicians are going to take on the billionaire press? Certainly not the likes of Keir Starmer.

One thing missing from Bright's discussion of the media is any account of the Great Antisemitism Scam that was unleashed against Jeremy Corbyn. Even the *Guardian* newspaper played a part in that, throwing its lot in with the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph*, so great was the perceived threat posed by a revival of Labour reformism. Why was this issue ignored, especially as it was an important factor in installing Johnson in power? Nevertheless, the chapter on the press and TV, 'The Protection Racket', is essential reading.

There is one area that this reader would have liked Bright to explore in more detail: the Australian connection. The Liberal Party in Australia (not a centrist or left-leaning party in the British tradition, but actually a right-wing entity) enjoyed significant success during the 1990s through the work of campaign strategist Lynton Crosby. A study of the extent to which the Tories have been influenced by those Antipodean successes, would have been most interesting. They have had an association with Crosby since the mid 2000s – and he was knighted in 2015 for services rendered

But what about Bright's sometimes too cosy view of pre-Austerity politics? Am I being fair here? He does, for example, make the point that 'New Labour continued Thatcher's neoliberalism, with successive left-wing administrations actively encouraging the excesses of the financial sector'. (p. 245) Obviously, the first problem here is whether the Blair or Brown governments were in anyway 'left-wing'. Towards the end of the book, he writes that '(t)here is no more brazen example of how Britain has been flogged to an international elite than the government's approach to visas'. While asylum seekers are treated like criminals, the super rich, including many actual criminals, are allowed in under the golden visa scheme. The scheme was introduced in 2008 when Gordon Brown was Prime Minister. It was New Labour, not the Conservatives, who really opened the doors for the international super rich. London began its celebrated transformation into 'Londongrad' under Blair and Brown. Nevertheless, Bright elsewhere contrasts the apparent public service ethos of Prime Ministers Brown and May, with Johnson's selfish egomania. Johnson, we are told, certainly had – indeed embodied – 'old aristocratic privilege'. But unlike his posh predecessors, he had abandoned the 'old aristocratic ideals of public service'. Bright does acknowledge that May was 'privately schooled', but considers her as having more in common with the likes of Gordon Brown and Keir Starmer than Boris Johnson. To be fair, May was state educated for most of her school life, so she was obviously not completely corrupted!

Looking back to the 1950s he actually says that if the likes of Harold Macmillan 'didn't always enact the most publicly-spirited policies' this was down to the public school system, but the public spirit was definitely there. (p. 64) This is just so much rubbish. Harold Macmillan and co were always primarily concerned to look after the interests of their class, and any so-called 'public-spirited policies' merely reflected the balance of class forces in society. Sometimes it was actually necessary to make reluctant concessions to the wellbeing of the mass of the population. What has changed over the last three or four decades is that there is no longer any need to make concessions to the majority of the population, because wealth and power are so concentrated in the hands of the super rich. And the New Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown were little different from Thatcher. They consolidated and extending 'Thatcherism' – championing big business, deregulating the financial sector, continuing privatisations and effectively handing the state over to business consultants. After 2008, Brown prepared the way for Tory Austerity and the creation of contemporary Food Bank Britain, afloat in a sea of raw sewage courtesy of the privatised water companies and their shareholders. For both Blair and Brown, just as much as for Cameron and Osborne, the interests of the rich and super rich always came first.<sup>5</sup>

And yet, as Bright insists, politics has certainly degenerated in the last few years, with the stench of Boris Johnson's government still very much present. While he chronicles all this to tremendous effect, his explanation is just not adequate. The reality is that since Thatcher's victories over the trade unions in the 1980s, and New Labour's steadfast refusal to assist/allow a trade union revival, the balance of class forces in Britain has shifted decisively in favour of the rich and super rich. Blair, it is worth remembering, openly admired and praised Thatcher, and on a number of occasions made clear that he wholeheartedly supported her fight against the miners. And both Blair and Brown courted Rupert Murdoch, giving him an effective veto – and this is not an exaggeration – over government policy.<sup>6</sup>

It is absolutely vital to remember the realities of New Labour. Because to prepare the way for Starmer's NuLab, we are seeing a determined attempt to forget just how subordinate to big business and the rich New Labour were. So great is the power of the super rich in Britain today – whether they be British,

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<sup>5</sup> For explorations of New Labour politics see my 'True crime stories: some New Labour memoirs' at <<http://isj.org.uk/true-crime-stories-some-new-labour-memoirs/>> and for Gordon Brown's political trajectory see my 'Brown's Journey from Reformism to Neoliberalism' at <<http://isj.org.uk/browns-journey-from-reformism-to-neoliberalism/>>.

<sup>6</sup> For Murdoch and New Labour see my '"Most humble day": the Murdoch empire on the defensive' at <<http://isj.org.uk/most-humble-day-the-murdoch-empire-on-the-defensive/>>.

Russian, Saudi, Emirati etc. – we live under a regime comparable to the Old Corruption of the eighteenth century. It might usefully be called the New Corruption. The consequences of this have only really become apparent in the course of the Tories' Austerity regime, culminating in the openly corrupt Johnson government of 'All the Incompetents'. It has to be insisted that the Old Etonians and the other public schoolboys that Bright focuses on are a *symptom* of the state we are in, not the *cause*. Starmer's Labour Party, with the left either purged or cowed, is not going to challenge this New Corruption. They will embrace it, just as Blair and Brown embraced Thatcherism and Rupert Murdoch.

Will Bright take on a Starmer Labour government with the same admirable forensic ferocity that he has used to dissect the Conservative Austerity regime? So far, the signs are not that good. As we have seen, he has not turned his critical gaze on the Great Corbyn Antisemitism Scam, or the reality that in 2019 a majority of Labour MPs actually preferred a Johnson general election victory to a Corbyn win. (Of course, they hadn't counted on a Conservative landslide.) And he seems to have remained pretty silent regarding Starmer's ruthless ongoing purge of the left in the Labour Party, establishing an authoritarian internal regime such that Blair could only dream of.<sup>7</sup> We shall see.

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<sup>7</sup> Back in October 2020, writing in the *Byline Times*, 'Solidarity Forever? Len McCluskey's War on Labour Electibility', Bright criticised Len McCluskey and UNITE for cutting funding to Starmer's Labour describing it as being like 'a drive-by shooting' out of a Mafia movie. A far better analogy would be of a union cutting funding for a Labour Party determined to side with the bosses rather than the workers.